

## Narrative Excerpt: Romance

Slowly, the grip burying into the soft meld of flesh and cloth loosens, slacks, fingers falling flat once more on the round of Sira's shoulders. That single word resonates within his ears, overlaid by the tones of voices imagined and remembered at once, a cacophony of familiar and alien sounds twining into a haunting song of memory.

Desmond closes his eye, pushes at the illusory world with a battered will, breath suspended somewhere in his chest.

It's not real, not any of this. If only he could think past the pain in his head and the voices trembling inside his ears, he could see things with an empirical, critical eye, could see *himself*..

As the thing he's meant to be; the thing both present and absent, a ghost given fleshy form with an expiration date branded into his creation.

A soft touch slides from his side, finds purchase in the curve of his spine. His chest, tightened and impossibly heavy, is enveloped in a warmth that seems to gently ebb away at the crystals trapped in his throat. It hurts at first, it feels like glass is sliding around inside his ribs and opening the passage of breath with caresses of sharp edges, but that too begins to dull into an almost pleasant ache.

*It's like we're dancing*, Desmond thinks idly, gaze returned to the world to settle on the interlocked hands, the unsteady rise and fall of both their lungs whispering around him.

*But that's what we've always done, isn't it?*

They've waltzed around and away from the underlying truth beneath them, crossing the cosmos in their makeshift home with careful steps and twists to never stray too close to the fragile, finite quality of their relationship. The inherent mortality of their time together.

He can't help but laugh at the absurdity of it, a pained, hollow sound that could as easily turn into a cry if only he'd let his lips stop smiling.

For a man trained to see into the truth of things, he really has been quite an idiot. Everyone else has seen it, telling him the truth he so fervently wants to deny, but he... never wanted to listen. He could always find a reason why it was wrong, a misinterpretation.

But now Sira is telling him that same truth, even if she isn't quite aware, and the feeling of suffocating tightness returns to his chest.

If not hatred that drives her to twist Desmond's mind, then what?

Something that, even when outside the shadow of illness cast on them now, will hasten the end of this dance.

He cannot know the way that Sira feels, not when he is such a poor judge of himself, but in this moment, he sees into himself with a clarity that's startlingly bright.

Excerpt: Lauren Cochran

"Then... please hate me," Desmond whispers.

This precious warmth does not belong to him, is not among those gifts which he's been offered by the hands of circumstance in his life... but for just a moment, he chooses to relish it. In all of its chaos and pain and confusion, Desmond lets himself sink, free hand lowering, sliding around ribs to mirror her embrace. His head drops down, aching and dizzy as it is, against the curve of Sira's neck, deep breaths gathering in as much memory scent as he can.

No, he can't have this, and he's sure the memory of this moment will haunt him for years to come.

"If you don't," he starts, pausing with visible struggle to make himself speak, "I might not be able to pretend I don't want this anymore. I might not..."

Desmond swallows, hard. His voice is barely above a whisper as he finishes, "I might not ever be able to leave you."

One more inhale, shaking and difficult, before he summons his will and lets the fingers within his grasp loosen, drops his other hand away from Sira. He steps back, forces himself to make eye-contact in spite of the pain of it, gently pulling his hand free.

A small smile, not of the jester's mania or pantomimes so common, touches his lips. There's gratitude in its wavering form--gratitude and heartbreak.

Again he speaks, though he can scarcely hear the sound of himself over the crashing inside his own head:

"Goodbye, Sira."